



## **Equity Committee**

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## **Disability Education**

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## **Position**

It is the position of the Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of Iowa's youth, to form a law requiring schools to teach about intellectual and developmental disabilities in kindergarten, 3rd Grade, and 5th Grade to dismantle a lack of awareness and education surrounding students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

## **Current Situation**

Children attend school every day to receive a diverse education in an environment that is supposed to be safe and inclusive for everyone. During the 2020-2021 school year, the number of students who received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was 15%. This is around 7.2 million students out of the 49.5 million students enrolled in public schools (Students with Disabilities, 2022). Out of the ten studies regarding the correlation between bullying and developmental disabilities, results show that students with disabilities get bullied two to three times more than their able-bodied peers (Bullying Affects Students, 2021). On top of bullying, these students experience many other issues and struggles in the classroom. It is important to ensure every child feels important and understood in their classroom, and bullying makes them feel excluded and isolated.

There is no requirement for there to be any education about disabilities and disability history in Iowa. Because of their lack of knowledge, students may be intimidated by the thought of interacting with their disabled peers, causing them to choose not to. If an interaction occurs, the student may not properly be educated on how to interact with the student who has a disability. This may cause the interaction to be negative for everyone involved. It is essential to provide students with disabilities with a safe space to pursue the education they deserve. Teaching students about disabilities and the history of them would ensure a safe and healthy environment for everyone. People with disabilities have been rejected by society for no reason except ignorance; a word that has been the cornerstone of prejudice for centuries worldwide. The time is now for people with disabilities to feel loved and accepted by society.

## **Rationale**

A child's understanding that their peers may have different abilities or they may have a disability starts at a very young age. According to an article published by Baylor University, children at the ages of one and a half to two years old may verbalize that they see a physical difference in another child. While these children are just stating what they see, this can easily be redirected by positively associating what these children are seeing with proper information about why people with disabilities may have a different appearance and display different social skills (*How to Teach Children About Disabilities and Inclusion* 2021). In addition to this, 10% of all disabilities are invisible, meaning that you will not be able to see

them just by looking at the person (*Disability Impacts All of Us* 2022). With invisible disabilities being prevalent in society, it is important to teach children about them as well.

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was signed into law in 1975, various legislative efforts have been put in place to ensure that classrooms are inclusive for people with disabilities, and this has been very beneficial to every child, disabled or not, but this still poses a significant problem for those with disabilities. Inclusive school environments do not ensure that students with disabilities will have a positive experience. Research shows that a child's negative attitude about people with disabilities stems from perceived differences. With this, disability education programs have been identified as effective ways to provide interventions to these opinions. (*Disability Awareness Program for Young Children* 2022). According to Maureen Perkins, a Public Health Analyst a part of the Health Resources and Services Administration, talking with children about acceptance and looking beyond the differences of others only helps in preventing bullying (Perkins, 2019). Educating children at a young age about people with disabilities would not only teach children about people with disabilities but would also prevent and reduce the already increased risk of discrimination against people with disabilities. According to Baylor University, educating children about people with disabilities can protect children with disabilities and encourage kindness and acceptance among students (*How to teach children about disabilities and inclusion* 2021).

The recommendation to integrate this into kindergarten, 3rd grade and 5th grade is examined from an evidenced-based perspective. According to the New York State Department of Health, bullying can start when a child is in preschool (*Department of Health* 2018). Integrating introductory disability education in kindergarten would help combat bullying among students with disabilities. During the elementary years, children start to learn academically and socially as their neural networks and other types of brain neurons form. When actions become automatic, and they rely on what they know (*Research in brain function and learning* 2015). The brain's capacity for change also decreases over time, supporting the idea that teaching disability education at a young age is influential (*Inbrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development* 2020). Children who are 8-10 years old have the urge to start making their own decisions and branching out. This would be an important time to cover disability education, as they are making personal decisions on how and if they are going to communicate with their disabled peers (*Brain development: Ages 8-10*).

### **Recommended Action**

If officially supported by the Iowa Legislature, we recommend the passage of a bill that requires students to be taught about the nature of intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities through age-appropriate education in a student's social studies classes. This curriculum would be implemented into the behavioral science anchor standard that is already implemented in all K-12 public schools. We recommend that this unit on disability education would occur in kindergarten, standard SS.K.7, 3rd-grade, standard SS.3.8, and 5th-grade standard SS.5.9. Each school district would be required to create a committee that consists of parents, teachers/administration, and student representatives to create an action plan for the present issues regarding disability education in their schools. Once this action plan is created, it should be sent to the school board for approval and implementation. It will be required that each committee sends a yearly report to the Iowa Department of Education consisting of information about when this unit was taught and what topics were taught. This would be implemented at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year.

Regards,  
Equity Committee, Iowa Youth Congress

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